



Political Economy

This part of our course on the revolutionary Classics is concerned with the hard-working period that followed the 1848 revolutions in France, Germany and other European countries and which culminated in the publication in 1867 of Volume 1 of Karl Marx's "Capital", which is the greatest Marxist "classic" of them all. That book is too large to accommodate in this ten-week course. It has a ten-part course of its own, followed by a further ten-part course on Volumes 2 and 3.

After the insurrections of 1848-1852, Karl Marx got down to

work on the unsolved problem of what he called “the source of the self-increase of capital”. Marx’s working papers are collected in the enormous “[Grundrisse](#)”, of which “Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy” (download linked below) is Chapter 1.

Marx read everything. He compiled notes of all the Political Economy books that had been written before him (eventually published as “Capital Volume 4”, also called “Theories of Surplus Value”), and he compiled an outline or plan for the first volume of his masterpiece, “Capital”, which is fully named “A Critique of Political Economy”.

The “Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy” was written in 1857. It precedes another, different work of Marx’s called “[A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy](#)” that was published two years later, and which itself precedes Capital Volume 1 (the full “critique”) by eight years. Capital Volume 1 was published (in German) in 1867.

Economics

First and foremost, today’s text reminds us that none of these works of Marx’s are comparable to ***economics***. On the contrary, they expose “economics” as a false and fraudulent discipline. Instead of economics, Marx’s works deal with what would now be called proper ***political economy***, or in other words the real relations between actual classes of people.

Marx begins by clearly differentiating his argument from that of the romantic philosopher **Jean-Jacques Rousseau**, and also from **Adam Smith**, and from **David Ricardo**, upon whom in other respects Marx relies quite heavily. It is worth quoting this passage at some length:

“The solitary and isolated hunter or fisherman, who serves Adam Smith and Ricardo as a starting point, is one of the unimaginative fantasies of eighteenth-century romances a la Robinson Crusoe; and despite the assertions of social historians, these by no means signify simply a reaction against over-refinement and reversion to a misconceived natural life.

“No more is Rousseau's contrat social, which by means of a contract establishes a relationship and connection between subjects that are by nature independent, based on this kind of naturalism. This is an illusion and nothing but the aesthetic illusion of the small and big Robinsonades.

“It is, on the contrary, the anticipation of "bourgeois society", which began to evolve in the sixteenth century and in the eighteenth century made giant strides towards maturity.

“The individual in this society of free competition seems to be rid of natural ties, etc., which made him an appurtenance of a particular, limited aggregation of human beings in previous historical epochs. The prophets of the eighteenth century, on whose shoulders Adam Smith and

Ricardo were still wholly standing, envisaged this 18th-century individual – a product of the dissolution of feudal society on the one hand and of the new productive forces evolved since the sixteenth century on the other – as an ideal whose existence belonged to the past.

“They saw this individual not as an historical result, but as the starting point of history; not as something evolving in the course of history, but posited by nature, because for them this individual was in conformity with nature, in keeping with their idea of human nature.”

A little later on in the “Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy”, Marx writes:

“But all this is not really what the economists are concerned about in the general part. It is rather – see for example Mill – that production, as distinct from distribution, etc., is to be presented as governed by eternal natural laws which are independent of history, and at the same time bourgeois relations are clandestinely passed off as irrefutable natural laws of society in abstracto. This is the more or less conscious purpose of the whole procedure.”

So Marx is saying, in 1857, that the purpose of all the economic “analysts” (the likes of Azzar Jammie et cetera) then as now, is to falsely pass off bourgeois reality as the permanent and the only possible reality.

The entire text is worth reading. It will be helpful towards

understanding Capital Volume 1, as well as towards understanding the politics of today's massive price rises, which are invariably, and falsely, presented in our bourgeois media as "governed by eternal natural laws which are independent of history".

The cartoon ("Reform Bill 1859") is by **Tenniel**, from the London magazine "**Punch**", made at the time when Karl Marx was working in London on his critiques of political economy. It illustrates the bourgeois turn from "protectionism" to "free trade" (now called "globalisation"). This happened when it suited the capitalists, whether it suited the workers or not. It happened in Britain approximately a century before it happened in the USA.

In this period, Marx continued to be, as we would say, "active". In the next part, we will see the momentous role that Marx was about to play as an individual leader in the foundation of structures which were the fore-runners of many still-existing revolutionary organisations of today, including the SACP.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Introduction to a Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy 1857, Marx.](#)
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